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U.S. Concession or 'Coercive' Ploy?

Reagan's Surprise: Deciding To Stick With SALT II

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Last Sunday afternoon, a middle-ranking official in the White House placed a telephone call to a colleague in the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. "The store has been given away," the man at the White House reported glumly.

President Reagan, he explained, had defied the expectations of many of his advisers and opted for a dramatic course of action no official had proposed at a key meeting of the National Security Council the previous Monday. The president had decided to dismantle a Poseidon submarine and its 16 intercontinental missiles to adhere, for the time being, to the unratified SALT II pact—an agreement Reagan had repeatedly denounced as "fatally flawed."

One measure of the unexpected nature of Reagan's decision was the fact that Paul H. Nitze, the 78-year-old special adviser on arms control who is widely regarded as the senior administration counselor on these issues, returned from a trip to Europe last Sunday night expecting Reagan to opt for putting that Poseidon sub in dry dock—less than complete adherence to SALT II, and a signal of U.S. concern to the Soviet Union. Nitze was surprised to learn on his return to work Monday morning that, instead, the president was about to announce that he would "go the extra mile" for arms control by dismantling the submarine.

Although it still is not known what triggered the president's decision, the manner in which it was reached and the strategic consequences of the option

Reagan chose provide intriguing revelations about the way this administration works.

Interviews with numerous officials suggest that Reagan responded to pressures from allies in Europe, Congress and, according to some credible sources, from his wife and close political associates as well. An important factor, some sources said, was Reagan's desire to keep alive the prospects for a summit meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

As several key officials acknowledged late last week, Reagan's course of action must have been strongly influenced by the realization that his sharply divided administration could not come up with an attractive, agreed-upon option for American strategic policy in the fifth year of his presidency.

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Weinberger argued that the United States should announce it would cease respecting the agreement as of Dec. 31, but also declare there was no intention to accelerate strategic weapons-building programs. He was sharply critical of the proposal to mothball a Poseidon sub, calling it "the worst of all possible options." Reportedly, the Navy did not like the idea, which presented practical problems and deprived the Navy of a potentially useful ship.

Saying jokingly that he would now defend "the worst of all possible options," Adelman defended his dry-docking proposal. Central Intelligence Agency Director William J. Casey gave an intelligence estimate of the Soviet perception of the situation. Attorney General Edwin Meese III briefly outlined the legal status of the pact, and reportedly made the strongest arguments for full abandonment of SALT II.

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